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MIŁOSZ AND TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICAN AVANT-GARDES

Abstract: Miłosz was an avant-garde poet who consequently realized his program of rejuvenating mid-twentieth-century Polish poetry: he wanted to cure the maladies of Romantic and nationalistic discourses in order to prevent poetry from addressing important contemporary issues. Although he finally became very critical of avant-gardes, his initial, restoring impulse came from the Poundian need to “make it new.” Miłosz’s great poetry of the 1970s developed Pound’s formal inventions, particularly the “ideogrammatic method,” thus generating meanings in the poem by setting its fragments against one another. The Polish poet often criticized the achievements of the New York School poets, yet he admired their artistic freedom. He realized, however, that he himself could not contradict the “poetics of rescue” he had been following for years. The world presented in Miłosz’s late poems is not obvious. Its most astonishing feature is the perspective from which the narrator addresses the reader: the timeless space, where the dead meet the living, has nothing to do with a picture of the world based on mimesis. Miłosz’s “second space” has a lot in common with the “real reality” designed by surrealists, which John Ashbery evokes in his recent poems. Both poets reach a similar mystical point where the word touches upon the mystery.

Keywords: Miłosz, avant-garde, Pound, ideogrammatic method, synecdochic space, Ashbery, scenic mode, *unheimlich*, “really real”

*Yes, I'd like to be the poet of five senses
and that's why I forbid myself to become one.*

Czesław Miłosz, "W Mediolanie" (In Milano)¹

1.

Let me start on a personal note. Between 1997 and 2003 I had the honour to meet Czesław Miłosz a few times, and I had two or three brief conversations with him on contemporary American poetry. At that time I could not accept – and I still cannot – the categorical division between two traditions in popular and critical discourses in Poland: on the one hand, there is a poetry based on mimesis, which does not question the relationship between the signifier and the signified; on the other, there is a poetry rooted in modernist experimentation, which tries to problematize the above relationship. A few years ago the above distinction materialized in Polish cultural magazines into a literary dispute between the supporters of a naively "comprehensible" poetry and those who valued an "incomprehensible" poetry. The debate attracted such critics and poets as Jacek Gutorow and Jacek Podsiadło.² The first type of poetry, defended by Podsiadło, has often been championed by critics as a continuation of the main line of Polish verse, running from Kochanowski and Mickiewicz to Miłosz, and recently most convincingly represented by Bronisław Maj and Janusz Szuber. The second type of poetry, propagated by Gutorow, starts with radical experiments of the Futurists, such as Anatol Stern or Tytus Czyżewski, and its precarious development is represented by original and dispersed poets whose critical status and readerly reception are still prone to change. Those poets include Tymoteusz Karpowicz, Zbigniew Bieńkowski as well as Andrzej Sosnowski, who has been the first poet in this tradition to gain broader popularity and critical acclaim. There is a similar division in American poetry, and Czesław Miłosz seemed to highlight it.

Asked about such New York School poets as John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara or James Schuyler, Czesław Miłosz told me that their poetry was

¹ All translations of Polish authors by Paweł Marcinkiewicz unless indicated otherwise.

² Jacek Podsiadło (b. 1964) is a contemporary Polish poet and novelist, whose verse is seemingly traditional, based on realistic presentation. Jacek Gutorow (b. 1970) on the other hand, is a poet and critic very close to the Stevensian tradition of the evanescent self. Hence both authors were adversaries in the debate I'm referring to.

exceptionally rich: the “city impressionism” very accurately rendered alienation of the contemporary urbanite from the world of nature. Additionally, in the New York School poets, particularly in Ashbery, there were many interesting references to French surrealism and also many allusions to English poetry of the eighteenth century. According to Miłosz, the greatest weakness of the New York School poets, which denied them the status of a major literary movement, was their use of excessive “weirdness.” The last feature was a purely aesthetic strategy which created a “chalk circle” – *peu de réalite* – of predetermined literary approaches, fossilizing the poets’ reaction to the world (Miłosz 1951: 85). In O’Hara’s poems, the above weirdness manifests itself in his exorbitant usage of proper names – the names of people or places – which are incomprehensible for the reader. In Ashbery’s poems, the weirdness includes the incessant breaking of coherent narration and questioning of the central position of the self as the authorial sanction securing credibility of the text, which becomes not so much incomprehensible as unserious. This lack of seriousness is connected with the over-the-top fascination with play, frolic, or *blague*, in which the word is pushed out of the referential system and loses its ability to mean. One of my conversations with Miłosz ended with his characteristic rebuff: “Ashbery’s poetry can be beautiful, but do we need to be so weird when writing verse?” Interestingly, speaking about American poets and the duties of poetry in America, Miłosz often resorted to Leo Tolstoy, quoting spacious fragments of the master from *Yasnaya Polyana* in Russian.

It seems that Tolstoy contributed to Miłosz’s distrust of *art for art’s sake*, devoid of moral obligations, which he certainly associated with the American avant-garde of the 1950s. Also Tolstoy stands behind Miłosz’s rejection of the Emersonian individualism and the radical subjectivity of the New York School poets’ artistic vision. Miłosz’s perception of the American avant-garde tradition is not merely an example of the Bloomian misreading – a misinterpretation that could serve as an unconscious defense against an alternative poetics which was perhaps closer to the Polish poet than he would have liked to admit. Several of Miłosz’s comments suggested, perhaps perversely, that in his poetry he valued most *Three Winters* – a volume that he, as well as critics, found quite problematic because of the surreal technique used in many poems, which is illustrated by the poet’s conversation with Renata Gorczyńska. Miłosz consciously constrained his yearnings for an avant-garde poetics, and this stance allowed his patient development of, as Jan Błoński puts it, “a poetry of rescuing or a rescue (...),

which, like *apokatastasis*, is supposed to save or restore the whole visible reality in its fullness of perfect existence” (1987: 60). The above constraint does not have a categorical character: in Miłosz’s later volumes there are numerous parallels to the avant-garde of Anglo-American modernism or, in the poet’s own parlance, examples of “weirdness;” moreover, there are thematic and conceptual similarities to the first generation of the New York School poets. In Miłosz’s poems, one can find the Poundian concept of poetic language with the meaning-production mechanism resembling the ideogrammatic method; finally, one can find the uncanny, otherworldly space of “real reality” that emerges in Ashbery’s late volumes. In order to understand what Miłosz wanted to reject from the Anglo-American avant-garde tradition, it would be worthwhile to examine the split that occurred in it during the second and the third decades of the twentieth century.

2.

In *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* (1981), Marjorie Perloff claims that we can distinguish two major traditions in poetry of Anglo-American modernism. The first runs from Baudelaire and Mallarmé and leads to the so-called high modernism of Yeats, Eliot, Auden and Frost, and their symbolist heirs such as Lowell and Berryman. The second starts with Rimbaud, finds its continuators in Stein, Pound, Williams and Beckett, and later culminates in the New York School poets. The first tradition, including Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and Auden’s “Bucolics” (written three decades after Eliot’s masterpiece), creates a network of symbolic associations within the poem’s thick texture, which becomes a “reverberating echo chamber of meanings” based largely on mimetic representation (Perloff 1999: 16). The second tradition, manifesting itself in Pound’s *Cantos* or Williams’s *Spring and All*, cuts off the poem’s symbolic evocations from established ideas about the world in such a way that it becomes “impossible to decide which of these associations are relevant” for a symbolic interpretation of the poem and “which are not,” denying the reader any purchase on meaning (Perloff 1999: 18). For Yeats, the symbol is “the only possible expression of some invisible essence” or “a transparent lamp around a spiritual flame, which materializes as a hand pointing the way into some divine labyrinth;” for Pound, poetry states facts and therefore the use of “a symbol with an ascribed or intended meaning” leads to “producing very bad art” (Perloff 1999: 16, 166).

Perloff tries to see the problem of meaning-production in poetry from a broader perspective, analyzing Roger Cardinal's essay "Enigma." In the last hundred and fifty years, European poetry went through a three-stage cycle which defined its relationship to what was mysterious or inexpressible. In the first stage, which dated from early romanticism to the mid-19th century, poetry's fascination with mysteriousness and inexpressibility could be seen in its subject matter and that is how it functioned in Novalis's series *Hymnen an die Nacht*. In the second stage, which concurred with the advent of symbolism and culminated in high modernism, poetry wanted to be mysterious because its subject matter had to be guarded against profanity of common readers. The difficulty of Mallarmé's sonnets did not result from their content but from clothing them in *une ombre exprès* that veiled the meaning under the surface of the text, so that only the chosen readers could find it. In the final stage of the cycle, starting with Rimbaud, "a sensibility may be said to emerge that is prepared to occupy itself with the gestures of mystery and defer clarification of the content of the mystery" (Perloff 1999: 29). Such poetic "works of enigma" are poised "between sense and nonsense;" they are "revelations" of the world's meaning that simultaneously "re-veil" what they discover (Perloff 1999: 29).

From the perspective of Polish literary criticism, it seems that the border between the post-symbolic Baudelairean tradition of high modernism represented by Yeats or Eliot and the anti-symbolic Rimbaudian tradition represented by Pound or Williams has never been – and due to cultural differences could not have been – very clear. Miłosz assimilated Eliot's poetry as well as that of Yeats's and Auden's quite early, which was testified by his excellent translations of those poets made between 1940 and 1960. As for Pound, Miłosz did not translate him and spoke of him rarely and with reserve, mostly when he wrote on Eliot, describing the author of *Cantos* as Eliot's caricatural older brother. For example, in *The Witness of Poetry*, a collection of Miłosz's Charles Eliot Norton lectures, we find the following statement: "It is difficult to find any tomorrow in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, and where there is no tomorrow, moralizing makes its entrance. The very chaos of ideas in his friend Ezra Pound's *Cantos* proclaims a reactionary political option" (Miłosz 1983: 14–15, original English version). Elsewhere in the same collection Miłosz claims: "In Eliot and to some extent in Pound a certain norm is placed in the past, and any departure from it shows the trashiness of the modern sensibility. According to Eliot and Pound, contemporary poets are caught by the inferno of the metropolis, the Baude-

lairean *la cité infernale*, but they can defend themselves trying to follow the old norm” (Miłosz 1990: 38).³ Obviously, the above diagnosis is true because the only thing that was left for Modernists from the Dantean world was the inferno of the waste, the sad present time; yet it is intriguing what this diagnosis passes over, namely the poetic strategies and techniques of escaping from the inferno.

3.

When he came to London in 1909, Pound was acutely aware that, in order to render the complexities of the modern self, poetry needed to be developed in the direction first shown by Matisse and Cézanne. The fundamental task for the development of modern art was to overcome the nineteenth-century traditions of realism and symbolism, as Apollinaire wrote in his *Les Peintres cubistes* (1913), by avoiding “any representation of natural scenes” as “real resemblance” (qtd in: Perloff 1999: 111). The space of the modern work of art – and the modern poem – was to be non-symbolical, made of Bergsonian images that conveyed the thinking process by intuitive perceptions, without the mediation of preconceived ideas. In Pound’s approach, there was a strong influence of the Rimbaudian *phanopoeia*, which is “a casting of images upon the visual imagination” (Perloff 1999: 179). *Imagisme* was Pound’s first step in his program of modernizing poetry: in the poem, meanings were generated via metaphors, merging the intellectual and the emotional, which was a useful means of condensing the poem and improving the line as a compositional unit. However, the sense-resonating image stopped movement in the work of art, while the modern poem – to express the spirit of its time – needed to become a *field of action*, full of sudden veerings, unexplainable exclamations or disrupting noises. Pound managed to realize the idea of such poetry (if it was possible to realize it at all, which some critics doubt) in his epic poem *The Cantos*, whose design he had started to develop as early as 1904; he worked on it for sixty-seven years until his death (Hall 1979: 222). The most revolutionary aspect

³ Interestingly, the English version of *Świadectwo poezji* [The Witness of Poetry] differs significantly from the Polish one, and it seems that Miłosz was generally less prone to radical claims in English. For example, the above quotation is much shorter in English and it reads: “In Eliot and to some extent in Pound a certain norm is placed in the past, the model of time is regressive, the future does not promise anything good” (Miłosz 1982: 34).

of *The Cantos* is what Miłosz more or less accurately called the “chaos of ideas”: the flat surface of the poem, which resembles a cubist collage, is a site of collision for fragments of narration, quotations and imagistic metaphors. No longer is such a poem a fragmented iconic representation, but rather it becomes an abstract configuration. Its “referential process” is not completely “cut off,” but it is “subordinated to a concern for sequential or spatial arrangement” (Perloff 1999: 182).

Each of *The Cantos* has a structure of a musical composition and, analogously to a musical piece, it follows a *major form*, which is like a tonic key – a central idea determining the proportions of the paraphrased or quoted material. The proper sense of the poem is generated, as it were, interactively when the reader tries to grasp the relations of its separate elements, which Pound borrowed from Ernest Fenollosa’s concept of characters in Chinese as elucidated in “The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry.” The ideogrammatic sense of the text remains unstated because it is formed only in the reader’s mind, which determines its individual character. *The Cantos* does not express directly what has to be thought, but only what has to be experienced in the act of reading. According to Pound, such a composition is closer to nature, where everything is interrelated. “Canto LXXIX,” one of the most beautiful of the late *Pisan Cantos*, opens with a disturbing vision:

Moon, cloud, tower, a patch of the battistero
all of a whiteness,
dirt pile as per the Del Cossa inset
think not that you wd/ gain if their least caress
were faded from my mind
“I had not loved thee half so well
Loved I not womankind”
So Salzburg reopens
lit a flame in my thought that the years
Amari-li Am-ar-i-li!
and her hair gone white from the loss of him
and she not yet thirty.
(Pound 1996: 504)

The central idea of the poem, its tonic key, is imprisonment: arraigned for treason, Pound was incarcerated in an open steel cage where he spent twenty-seven days in the Disciplinary Training Centre near Pisa in May and June 1945. It is from the perspective of the cage that the reader can see

the phantasmal landscape, painted with a few strokes of the pen, and its main metaphor is whiteness – of the moon, the cloud and the Baptistery of St. John in Pisa. Whiteness is the primeval “baptismal” space of the origin, suggesting the speaker’s wish to return to the source of his spiritual energies. The third line’s naturalistic *dirt pile* shatters the sublime vistas, bringing a reference to the Quattrocento Italian painter, Francesco del Cossa, best known for his frescos with ludic motives. The opening three lines, which could stand alone as an imagistic poem, imperceptibly introduce the next ideogram – an anaphora, where the speaker’s fear of death mixes with his fear of losing his beloved. The following ideogram, which is not separated graphically from the main body of the poem, except for quotation marks, is an ironic paraphrase of Richard Lovelace’s “To Lucasta, Going to the Wars,” whose last stanza reads: “I could not love thee, Dear, so much/ Loved I not Honour more.” Pound’s poem replaces “honour” with “infidelity.” The images used in the fragmented narration of the last ideogram repeat Lovelace’s love-rejecting gesture: *Amarilli, mia bella* is a pastoral confession of altruistic love while Pound’s poem presents the white-haired woman, emotionally devastated by her lover.

In “Canto LXXIX,” all four distinctive sections have their own meanings, but the meaning of the whole poem is generated in the spaces between the sections. Each section is an ideogram whose sense depends on its interaction with the preceding or the following ideograms. The overall meaning, a relational energy of the text, remains unstated, trickling from the cracks and fissures between the images. The series of dichotomies – “landscape/ I,” “freedom/ imprisonment,” “love/ rejection of love,” “faithfulness/infidelity” – may be constantly reinterpreted in the reading process. Such a technique is close to cinematic presentation, where, according to Keith Cohen, the artist’s “I” does not point to the viewer, but it is projected onto the other: “the creating subject participates in the object, perhaps even becomes immersed in it, and in doing so charges the object with an ‘attitude,’ a visual configuration that reaches out to meet the consciousness of the spectator” (1979: 72). The poem’s referential noise and its illusionistic effect of overlapping voices seems to augur the late twentieth-century breach between the fixed signifier and the signified, common in postmodern literature.

Miłosz’s poetry written in the 1950s, starting from *Daylight* (1953), introduces a form close to the poetic collage: more and more often the poem’s meaning relies on independent numbered sections or stanzas, whose

coherence seems to be severely reduced in comparison with the poems in *Rescue* (1945). The above technique is used in a poem “Dwaj w Rzymie” (Two Friends in Rome), whose main line of presentation – a first-person narrative about the role of contemporary poetry – is interrupted by a line of secondary importance, a story about a night walk through the city and a meeting with a street dancer watched by a crowd of war wrecks. What seems most innovative in Miłosz’s poem is that it abandons coherence in a rather inconspicuous manner, producing unpredictable senses, which is visible already in the rift between the first two stanzas:

Darkness starts over the Castle of the Holy Angel
In a motionless point of the globe, where the Tiber untangles time. (...)
One can hear the rustling of a lizard,
The mice’s footsteps, and the crying of the world.

As long as the human body is pierced by hot currents
And out of its love for other bodies it brings to life trembling forms
One can live in delight or in despair
(Miłosz 1993: 241)

The reflections in the second stanza do not result directly from the picture (quite imagistic, by the way) presented in the first stanza. The poem’s sense is generated by the clash between the description of the mythical city and the meditation on the transitoriness of human life, which produces a sudden change of perspective: as a result, historical evocations of Rome are blurred or semantically relocated, creating a textual gap that has to be filled in by the reader. As in Pound’s “Canto LXXIX,” the poem yields a new meaning that remains unstated. The strategy of fragmentation that generates random senses intensifies in Miłosz’s poetry in the 1960s and becomes particularly interesting in the form which would be characteristic of his late poetry and which, inspired by Walt Whitman, he was discovering at that time. This form is a peculiar mixture of the prose poem and the lyric, which annuls generic divisions: prose lines or blocks of different size are occasionally encrusted with versified fragments, separated by extra spaces. The closest English analogues are Auden’s longer poems from the 1950s and 1960s. In *King Popiel and Other Poems* (1962), Miłosz uses this form in “Dithyramb” (though other important poems in the collection: “From the Chronicle of the Town of Pornic,” “Album of Dreams” and “Through-out Our Lands” are equally fragmented). In *City Without a Name* (1969), the form is used in the long poem “With Trumpets and Zithers” (and also

in several shorter poems). Miłosz's most ambitious projects where he employs his characteristic form, revealing a strong influence of Pound's ideogrammatic method, are his two collections: *The Rising of the Sun* (1974) and *The Hymn of the Pearl* (1982).

4.

"The Separate Notebooks," which was published as the fourth part of Miłosz's *The Hymn of the Pearl*, is one of the greatest poems in Polish. The multivocal narrative stretches between contemporary California and the world of landed gentry from the beginning of the twentieth century, but it also presents glimpses of Warsaw from before World War II and during the German occupation. The central idea of the poem, as in the whole *Hymn of the Pearl*, is the problematic relationship between writing and experience. In a counterpoint to its central motif, the poem uses a negative vision of history as a cataclysmic cycle. Such a vision, however, develops certain sensitivity in the speaker: the individual human existence gains a special value as a contradiction of the burgeoning social order of a new *Diocletian's Rome* (see Gorczyńska 1992: 201). The poem consists of verse or prose sections-pages, whose sequence – initially broken (for example, "Page 1" is followed by "Page 10" and then "Page 12") – grows more and more consistent, and at the end of "The Separate Notebooks," in the section called "The Wormwood Star," all pages have their proper numbers from 38 to 50. This composition does not unify the poetic vision, but the author's intensions become clearer: he wants to express the whole world, to *cross over the frontier of words* (Miłosz 2006: 161; trans. Renata Gorczyńska and Robert Hass). As the poet admits in a conversation with Renata Gorczyńska, the structure of the poem is "loose. There is no causality. This is a work in progress" (Gorczyńska 1992: 199).

However, the poet's method – his *crossing over* the frontiers of the poem – resembles the Poundian ideogram very much. First, each page has its separate sense and it gains an additional, unpredictable meaning when read together with the preceding or the following pages. For example, after the coarse "Page 29," which is the speaker's self-portrait *In the shadow of the Empire, in Old Slavonic long-johns* (Miłosz 2006: 161), there is a sublime "Page 31," starting with an anaphora: *Pure beauty, benediction: you are all I gathered/ From a life that was bitter and confused* (Miłosz 2006:

162). In a linear reading, such an arrangement produces an ironic effect and questions the speaker's credibility. Quite often "Pages" in verse border on "Pages" in prose, but locations and characters change as well, which gives the reader a feeling of randomness and nimbleness, but it also suggests a focused work of imagination that illusionistically sustains the poem. However, the most important ideogrammatic senses are expressed in the poem's climaxes within the scope of particular "Pages." A good example is "Page 38," the first fragment in the apocalyptic section "The Wormwood Star," whose title, if we can trust the poet, was invented by Konstanty Jeleński (Gorczyńska 1992: 200). In the text of "Page 38" quoted below, I use a single continuous line to mark a veering that changes the course of the poem and a double line to mark a veering that actually stops narration, requiring the reader to redefine the poem's sense:

Now there is nothing to lose, my cautious, my cunning, my hyperselfish cat.
Now we can make confession, without fear that it will be used by mighty enemies.

We are an echo that runs, skittering, through a train of rooms.

Seasons flare and fade, but as in a garden we do not enter anymore.

And that's a relief, for we do not need to catch up with the others, in the sprints
and in the high jump.

The earth has not been to Your Majesty's liking.

The night a child is conceived, an obscure pact is concluded.
And the innocent receives a sentence, but he won't be able to unravel its meaning.

Even if he consults ashes, stars, and flights of birds.
A hideous pact, an entanglement in blood, an anabasis of vengeful genes arriving from swampy millennia,

From the half-witted and the crippled, from crazed wenches and syphilitic kings

At mutton's leg and barely and the slurping of soup.
Baptized with oil and water when the Wormwood Star was rising,

I played in a meadow by the tents of the Red Cross.

That was the time assigned to me, as if a personal fate were not enough.

In a small archaic town ("The bell on the City Hall clock chimed midnight, as a student N..." and so on).

How to speak? How to tear apart the skin of words?

What I have written seems to me now not that.

And what I have lived seems to me now not that.

When Thomas brought the news that the house I was born in no longer exists,
Neither the lane nor the park sloping to the river, nothing,

I had a dream of return. Multicolored. Joyous. I was able to fly.

And the trees were even higher than in childhood, because they had been growing all the years since they had been cut down.

The loss of native province, of a homeland,

Wandering one's whole life among foreign tribes –

Even this

Is only romantic, i.e., bearable.

Besides, that's how my prayer of a high school student was answered, of a boy who read the bards and asked for greatness which means exile.

The Earth has not been to you Majesty's liking.

For a reason having nothing to do with the Planetary State.

Nonetheless I am amazed to have reached a venerable age.

And certainly I have experienced miraculous narrow escapes for which I vowed to God my gratitude,

So the horror of those days visited me as well

(Miłosz 2006: 163–165; trans. Renata Gorczyńska and Robert Hass)

"Page 38" consists of several fragments revolving around the same theme, which is "exile" in its various senses and dimensions, from theological (exile from paradise) through psychological (exile from one's childhood) to political (exile from one's country) and artistic (exile from the literary canon). The passages between the poem's basic semantic units could be divided into three groups: the first group consists of logical passages from statement to statement, which sustain the poem's development; the second group distorts the causal relationship between the poem's statements, but the distortion does not disorient the reader and allows him or her to grasp the rationale of the poem's claims; the third group of passages radically stops the poem's development, forcing the reader to readapt his or her interpretation in order to find a broader perspective for the presented senses. As this is not always possible, the reader has to accept the text's

momentary lack of referentiality. In “Page 38,” the first two spacious lines form a coherent first-person narration, in which the speaker is addressing his conscience or inner self as his “cunning, (...) hyperselfish cat.” The third line and the lines that follow, however, slightly deform the burgeoning paradigm of a confessional poem. The meaning of the pronoun “we” seems to broaden the poem’s scope: not only does it include the speaker’s other, but also suggests a sense of community based on shared memories or dreams: “We are an echo that runs (...) through a train of rooms/Seasons flare and fade, but as in a garden we don’t enter anymore.” The reader might try to contain this new sense in a metaphorical structure: life is like a palace whose rooms are arranged in a train when observed from a perspective of old age. Yet two lines below, the poem suddenly changes its course and successfully evades the new interpretative perspective: “The Earth has not been to Your Majesty’s liking” fits neither the frame of confession nor reverie, and it may belong to an intertextual play of reference to the Polish Romantics started in the previous sections of the poem. When the poem is read sequentially, the line addressing “His Majesty” is an enigma whose inscrutability has to be accepted.

“Page 38” contains probably the most personal and painful confession in the whole of Miłosz’s oeuvre. After a series of lines separated by the second group of passages, from “I played in a meadow by the tents of the Red Cross” to “In a small archaic town,” there is a question that signals one of the more radical passages: “How to speak? How to tear apart the skin of words?” This confession of doubts about poetry’s artistic sense has a more sinister undertone than similar pronouncements about distrust of language or inability to speak typical of late Miłosz, which Joanna Zach describes in her important study, *Miłosz i poetyka wyznania* (Miłosz and the Poetics of Confession). Here, the “final disclosure” is not projected into the indeterminate future. The question requires a quick answer; it is given in the longest, four-line statement of the poem: one should write to make up for a loss or lack. However, the section below the statement also uses extra spaces to separate the lines of the poem, although narration is perfectly coherent. The reader, accustomed to filling in the poem’s gaps, mechanically tries to provide an additional meaning to the lines, but no meaning is missing this time. The reader’s effort – his or her patient interpretation of each line – produces a surplus meaning that is accumulated in emotions. When closely read, each separated line is like a painful blow: “[T]he house I was born in no longer exists, // Neither the lane nor the park sloping to

the river, nothing, // I had a dream of return.” The power of Miłosz’s words comes from the tremendous tension of unspoken emotions in the spaces between the lines, bringing to mind the ending of Marianne Moore’s poem “Silence”: “The deepest feeling always shows itself in silence; / not in silence, but restraint” (Moore 1994: 91). Here, Miłosz’s restraint becomes translated into the universal idea of suffering caused by political violence and resulting in displacement and forced migration.

The sequence of “The Separate Notebooks” reveals many affinities with Pound’s poetry. As *The Cantos*, Miłosz’s poem is a flat synecdochic space which is the opposite of the organic space of the symbolic poem. Talking with Renata Gorczyńska about “The Separate Notebooks” (before the poem came out in the 1982 collection, several of its sections had been published in literary magazines), Miłosz decisively rejects all attempts to read the poem symbolically: “an armored train,” which is motionless “under a cold aurora” (“Page 42,” 166) is a picture he remembers from life (Gorczyńska 1992: 201); the driver carting “frock-coats laced with silver” and “snuffboxes of speakers from chamber of deputies” (“Page 45,” 167) is the poet himself in Warsaw occupied by Germans (Gorczyńska 1992: 202); “Aunt Florentyna” (“Page 46,” 167) is the poet’s grandfather’s sister, whose photograph Miłosz kept in his archives (Gorczyńska 1992: 202–203); “one blood-red star” which is glowing “low on the horizon” (“Page 49,” 170) is a recollection of a night trip by train from Grodno to Suwałki in 1939, when a red Mars was visible in the sky for a few weeks (Gorczyńska 1992: 204); the lady “to whom a traveler offered a ring from Mongolia” (“Page 27,” 161) is the poet’s mother (Gorczyńska 1992: 207). Those examples – and many more that were mentioned in the conversation – prove that the space of “Pages” resembles an ideogrammatic montage. Already in the 1950s and 1960s, critics such as Kazimierz Wyka paid attention to Miłosz’s visual realism and his cinematic technique. Joanna Zach develops those notions and concludes that in Miłosz, montage is a particular ability to “order and contrast images so as to shape proportions between a perceptible and describable part and an elusive, inexpressible or silenced whole” (2002: 205). As in Pound’s *Cantos*, not only is vision in Miłosz’s “Notebooks” a sum of separate perspectives, but it creates a new aesthetic value, since the meaning of the metonymic chain of representation surpasses the meaning of individual images. According to Marjorie Perloff, the making of such metonymic sequences in which “the whole is something else than the sum of its parts” is common to both modernist poetry and cinematic technique (1999: 180).

5.

John Ashbery made his debut with *Some Trees* exactly twenty years after Miłosz's debut. In 1956, American poetry was shaped by the New Criticism, which was based on the Coleridgean transcendentalism and Jakobson's model of linguistic communication. The New Critics replaced the fuzzy nineteenth-century biographism and subjectivism with theories stressing an autonomous value of literary works – *verbal icons* or *artifacts* made of internal tensions – and normative rules of reading them. The poem was supposed to express objective emotions, and literary criticism was supposed to be based on the objective analysis of the text alone. However, the intended objectivism of the New Critics favoured the New Critical type of lyric poetry that best suited their critical apparatus – in Robert Lowell's words, "wonderful poems to teach:" inferential, elusive, hieratic, and above all predictable (qtd in Perloff 1998: 11). The inconspicuous craft made the text appear to be spoken in a natural, spontaneously sincere voice. There was a sense of immediacy to give the reader an illusion of re-experiencing the original event. Finally, there was a movement towards an emphatic closure carried out by structuring the poem's narration towards a sense of loss. The poem's ending tried to resolve the loss, providing emotional poignancy that transformed the entire lyric event into a metaphor for some general wisdom about the human condition. In his *Self and Sensibility in American Poetry*, Charles Altieri calls this framework the "scenic style" or the "scenic mode:" it does not aim at interpreting experience but at establishing an awareness of what lies beyond the poem which serves as a setting for the "reticent (...) and self-reflective speaker" (1984: 11).

According to Altieri, the scenic style is a continuation of the Romantic tradition, which can be best understood as a reaction against the Enlightenment strategies for idealizing reason in a process of replacing religious symbolism with Baconian empiricism (1984: 11–12). For most writers, the divergence between reason and Christian ontology took the form of a conflict between the ideals of lucidity and the ideals of lyricism, which made for the longest-running drama in Western culture. As Altieri observes, "[s]ituations and characters change, but the dual roles Enlightenment reason must play through all these guises – demystifying ideals and idealizing a model for a sense of values that resists all demystification – keep the central conflict as obvious as it is oppressive" (1984: 12). In poetry, lucid stances developed into a model of authenticity and directness, while lyri-

cism affirmed in a secular form predicated about mind, person and society that were the basic images of value in religious cultures. The scenic style operates within the borders of lyricism, achieving closure by a leap from the narrative to the visionary levels of the poem, where sensitive experience "reaches its climax in moments of resonant silence" or "controlled transcendental glimpses" (Altieri 1984: 15).

Such a compositional *procédé* leads to particular slippages and problems that motivate such poets as Ashbery to explore alternative ideals of imaginative expression. The first problem is connected with sincerity and naturalness, which are always achieved by means of manipulation or imposing artificial narrative structures to help the poem's particulars perform the symbolic chore in preparation for a "surprising" vision. As a result, the emotions produced by claims for direct presentation cannot be trusted. The second problem entails generating believable and satisfying lyrical emotions without falling into the trap of presenting a "smug, self-satisfied lyrical persona constantly transported into visionary states" (Altieri 1984: 15). The poem's overall emotional economy is threatened: its "sudden" discoveries may appear unconvincing or too general, while the pursuit of the resonant silence may produce emotions too aerial, too eagerly leading the reader to a secular transcendence. In its essence, the scenic mode is an oppressive model which produced in mid-twentieth century poets a conviction that nothing new could be said in poetry. Ashbery's *Some Tress*, as well as Miłosz's *Three Winters*, reveal their full potential best as self-consciously oppositional gestures, disrupting dominant literary traditions.

Ashbery's debut collection dismantles the scenic mode, as Altieri puts it, "making the conditions of speaking [its] central thematic concern" (1984: 18). Sincerity and naturalness are problematized by quasi-discursive reflections, disseminating the poem's subject into a series of rhetorically based stances or positions which are observed in reflective self-consciousness. Investigating these aspects of his own mature style, Ashbery observes: "I have always been averse to talking about myself, and so I don't write about my life the way the confessional poets do (...) I write with experiences in mind, but I don't write about them, I write out of them" (in: Stitt 1983: 37). As a result, the poem does not deal directly with experience but rather with the *experience of experience*. Transcendental closure is not the poem's goal but rather a point of departure for redefining the self, which – in contrast to the fixed, specular self – is a diffused nebula. The duality of discourse being discoursed upon focuses the reader's attention on the

complex play of motives behind the speaker's self-evasions: ultimately, the Ashbery lyric establishes a mobile field of lyric attachments. Here a linear, cumulative progress of meaning is replaced with independent, sense-generating whirls – such structural units as images or metaphors – and, instead of depth, there is a mingling surface. Rather than developing along a meticulously structured scheme, the poem follows a disorderly, conversation-like itinerary. The poem's efficiency is designed to produce surplus meanings which can or cannot be grasped, because words point to other words and often oppose the sense of what is being said.

"Sonnet" from Ashbery's debut collection does not aim at revealing any particular ideas, but explores feeble relationships between the concrete Poundian facts of the speaker's existence. Neither does it reject mimesis or representation, but rather extends them to a new egoless area:

The barber at his chair
Clips me. He does as he goes.
He clips the hairs outside the nose.
Too many preparations, nose!
I see the raincoat this Saturday.
A building is against the sky –
The result is more sky.
Something gathers in painfully.

To be the razor – how would you like to be
The razor, blue with ire,
That passes me? This is the wrong way.
The canoe speeds toward a waterfall.
Something, prince, in our backward manners –
You guessed the reason for the storm.

(Ashbery 2008: 33)

"Sonnet" is formally not a sonnet, and its title indicates erasure as a method of composition. On the one hand, the title introduces an old literary tradition, the tradition which, importantly, seems incongruous with the poem's content. On the other hand, the title "Sonnet" structures the reader's interpretation, underlining those aspects of the text that might otherwise be overlooked. As William Sharp observes, the sonnet form originated from the Greek epigram and slowly evolved into the Petrarchan *sonetto*, first as a *rispetto* (a short poem sung to the strings of a lute), then a *stornello* (a short, improvised, satirical poem) (1912: 9). The Petrarchan sonnet is usually a love poem, consisting of two major parts: the two-quatrain octave

and the two-tercet sestet. They form a logical argument in which the octave presents a problem and the sestet tries to solve it. This logical pattern is vaguely reflected by Ashbery's poem: the first stanza, opening with the speaker's account of his visit at a barber's shop, produces a loose narrative about an unhappy existence, with images evoking the feeling of failure (*Too many preparations, nose!*), loneliness (*A building is against the sky – / The result is more sky*) or bereavement (*Something gathers in painfully*). The direct address to the reader or someone close to the speaker introduced by the second stanza abruptly changes the course of narration.

Addressing the "you," the speaker moves the poem into even stranger regions of abstraction. The meditative languor of the first stanza suddenly crumbles under the blunt force of the question: "How would you like to be/ The razor, blue with ire?" The statement "To be the razor" implies closeness or at least a physical proximity, but the poem does not attempt at establishing a contact with the other, destroying the illusion of its sincerity with an authorial remark: "[t]his is the wrong way." The interpersonal closeness is repressed and what prevails is a sense of foreboding evoked by "the canoe" that "speeds toward a waterfall" and the final "storm." What makes Ashbery's poetic method so surprisingly close to Pound's ideogrammatic technique is its meaning-generating mechanism. The main sense in "Sonnet" is produced by the rift between the first and the second stanzas, both of which are truncated narratives with no interpretational key. However, Ashbery's imagery is also subversive, playfully blurring the Poundian concreteness. Most of the images in the first stanza are rather generic and yet very peculiar as lexical choices, while images in the second stanza are poetic clichés which reveal an uncontrollable and disturbed emotionality. *Some Trees* features one more "Sonnet" ("Each servant stamps the reader with a look") and a number of poems with similarly generic titles referring to poetic forms, such as "Eclogue," "Pantoum," "Canzone" or "A Pastoral," which Ashbery uses also in his more recent books. This is Ashbery's dialogue with the scenic style, his experience of literary experience.

6.

Perhaps the most important poetic innovation offered by Ashbery's mature volumes is the concept of realness merging surrealist vision with realistic solemnity. The very creation of such a space expresses a belief that

poetry finally depends on references to meanings outside language. The Ashberian “real,” recurring in several important poems from the poet’s late collections, seems to be closely related to the Lacanian “unsymbolizable” experience. For Lacan, the real emerges when people lose their grip on life, which may result from traumatic experience: due to trauma, everyday objects are denied their obvious and routine meanings, and they are perceived by the subject, in Freud’s parlance, as *unheimlich* – producing the feeling of an uncanny quality of existence. The Lacanian real is thus a revelation of what escapes the rule of the symbolic order, which structures human experience. Paradoxically, art is an area where the real is cautiously repressed because of the radically non-symbolical and unbearable character of realness. However, the real is always present in the subject as *Das Ding*, the Thing, which Lacan borrows from Heidegger. A good illustration of a Lacanian moment in Ashbery is “Idea of Steve” from *Planisphere*:

Too bad I have this idea of him
based on someone else, named Matt
(another uncluttered name), whom I disliked
for no reason other than having once thought
he misprised me, which I didn’t really believe. (Whew!)
This is getting complicated, like always.

Let’s leave Steve at the wellhead of dream,
where he belongs, and belongs also to others
who will make fun of him and gradually come to despise
themselves for doing so. He was a nice person and besides
didn’t deserve our unremitting attention, though
his bumper stickers indicated otherwise. Susan was different.
Who dials the phone and is further gone into snow
than the mass of individuals could be? She is quiet now,
she too.

(Ashbery 2009: 41)

The speaker addresses the reader from a place which is difficult to define – from the timeless present of the *wellhead of dream* or his memory’s lumber room. Steve is important because it is impossible to forget about him. Apparently, there is nothing special in him, but the speaker is astonished by Steve’s unknowability. The “idea of Steve” depends largely on others, and the speaker’s personal acquaintance with the person named Steve could only slightly change this situation. In the course of the poem, a seemingly objective reality loses its ontological attributes of realness:

Susan is introduced and her “dialing the phone and being further gone into snow than the mass of individuals” cannot be contained within a coherent narrative. The poem’s space turns out to be a labyrinth inhabited by apparitions, ghosts and phantoms. The indeterminate “someone else, named Matt” is the unsymbolizable other, the Freudian-Lacanian “*unheimlich*,” provoking the speaker to incessant attempts at discovering the sense of the past, which remains blurred.

A very similar concept of realness inhabited by incorporeal voices and images looms in Miłosz’s late poems, from *Farther Surroundings* (1991) through *It* (2000) to *The Second Space* (2002). In many poems, the speaker travels in time and takes part, as it were, in events that happen again, which he perceives from the cosmic, omniscient perspective. Ashbery condenses the space of the poem, deepening the feeling of strangeness by cut-ups and juxtapositions of contrastive images, while Miłosz presents longer fragments that are seemingly more coherent. “Aleksander Wat’s Tie” from *It* is a good example of Miłosz’s *unheimlich*:

That tie, knitted, with a thick knot
that matched perfectly a dark-colored shirt
and a tweed jacket, ravished me.

This was a really elegant fellow,
with his short-cropped black mustache.

We were introduced on Mazowiecka Street, a few steps
from Ziemianska restaurant and Mortkowicz’s bookstore
(the only place in Warsaw that carried my *Three Winters*,
published in an edition of 300 copies).

Whoever believes in Providence must see an Eye:
A rider from the Pamir Mountains gallops, all in rose and purple.
Then Benvenue Street in Berkeley and Wat on the couch.
His astonishment as he tries to grasp his fate.
And I, a young provincial with a tape recorder
who, it seems, was destined to bear witness.

It is true we lived together
through that horrible New Year’s Supper of 1950.

Poor Wat,
he suffered enough in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan.

A beautiful tie was of no avail,
nor the street of phantoms, Mazowiecka, in Warsaw.
(Miłosz 2003: 721)

The speaker addresses the reader from a place where many time perspectives converge: Warsaw of his youth, Berkeley, Warsaw on the New Year's Eve in 1950 (which he spent with Wat and his wife) a few days after he had learned that he could not leave Poland. Additionally, the speaker ironically lists places visited by Wat during his exile. All those locations are seen from the perspective of the Eye of Providence, which separates the speaker's individual existence from the events he describes. Moreover, the speaker occupies an indeterminate space outside the poem, where he conjures up the eponymous tie, the Heideggerian-Lacanian Thing, which forces him into perpetual guesswork about the purpose of "telling" stories about the meaning of the past. As Marek Zaleski claims in his *Zamiast. O twórczości Czesława Miłosza* (Instead. About Czesław Miłosz's Oeuvre), in late Miłosz "the 'now' belonging to a particular moment can be found only outside the language and time typical of our existence" (2005: 181). Thus, Miłosz's stance is close to the contemporary Orphics. Miłosz and Ashbery reach a similar dimension of the inscrutable "real reality," which is an oxymoron used by Ashbery to refer to Antonin Artaud's "real reality" of the poet – *une réalité dangereuse et typique*. Both poets try to uncover the real in the moments of revelation, beyond the organizing scope of imagination, in the timeless non-grammatical present of "the thistle, the nettle, the burdock, and belladonna." Both poets debunk reason to reveal the potential of language's latent powers, nourishing the poem that exists in a double reality of the writer and the reader.

7.

Was Miłosz an avant-garde poet? Was he as avant-garde as Pound and Ashbery? Or does his poetry belong to a different literary genre – the genre of easily understandable poetry, based on mimesis? Miłosz was an avant-garde poet as much as he had to be – and could be – to fulfill his plan to dismantle the romantic-national tradition of committed poetry and to broaden the rhetorical and philosophical scopes of mid-twentieth-century Polish literature with other pre-romantic and contemporary traditions, in-

cluding the Anglo-American one. It seems that Pound and Ashbery were realizing analogous artistic programs, which brought about comparable effects: all three poets modernized poetic language and accommodated poetic discourse to the needs of their readers and the exigencies of universal social and political experiences. As a result, poetry was able to express the Eliotean “mind” of the present time and could look forward to the future. Finally, it seems that no other mode of avant-gardism is possible...

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